

What is a focus group?

A **focus group** is a structured discussion designed to explore a specific topic, such as parent perspectives on adolescent use of social media or NP experiences with integrating telehealth into primary care. The discussion is led by a trained **facilitator** who uses a **discussion guide** to ensure consistency and depth across conversations. A focus group may also include a co-facilitator or a **notetaker** to assist with follow-up questions, capture nonverbal cues of participants and ensure accurate documentation of participant responses.

The ideal focus group size is 10 to 12 participants. This allows for a diversity of perspectives while ensuring that each participant can contribute to the conversation. Groups larger than 12 can be difficult to manage and may limit engagement with individual members.

Why should you conduct a focus group?

Focus groups are a method of collecting **qualitative data** on participants' preferences and experiences. They are useful for understanding the attitudes, motivations and reasoning that drive behaviors.

Focus groups differ from **interviews** in that they generate insights into common themes, construct collective meaning within a group and efficiently collect data from multiple people at once.

Integrating focus groups with quantitative data as part of **mixed-methods research** can be helpful in several ways:



Capture more in-depth, exploratory or unexpected information than quantitative data



Collect early input on new programs, services or policy to inform implementation



Suggest subgroups, variables or survey questions to use in quantitative analysis



Support interpretation of quantitative findings

What are the main steps in conducting a focus group?

Define a purpose

Articulate the goals and objectives of the focus group and identify key research questions or information needs.

Determine the budget

Identify available resources and anticipated costs, including meeting space or virtual platform fees, transcription services and staff time. It is important to include compensation for participants' time and expertise. AANP typically offers \$160 per hour, or \$240 for a 90-minute group.

Decide how many focus groups to conduct

This decision should reflect the budget, timeline, available pool of participants, research questions and type of evidence needed. A single group may be sufficient to generate exploratory or preliminary evidence or participant feedback. Two or more groups are better for comparing across subgroups, validating themes, dealing with complex topics or informing major decisions.

Select the type, location and time

Decide whether the focus group will be conducted in person or virtually. In-person groups enable better rapport and involve fewer distractions, but virtual groups are more convenient for many respondents and enable geographically dispersed samples. Focus groups are typically 60 to 90 minutes long.

Define participant eligibility criteria

Establish clear inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure participants are appropriate for the study objectives. For example, a focus group on NP student experiences might exclude NPs who have been in practice for more than a year. Identify other variables that require diversity to capture a meaningful range of perspectives, such as NP work setting.

Develop a recruitment plan

Outline the process for identifying and recruiting participants, such as generating a pool of eligible candidates and using randomization or other strategies to minimize selection bias. Draft recruitment messages, including reminders (see exhibits for an example recruitment message).

Draft the informed consent statement

Draft a brief, clear statement with enough information about confidentiality, data privacy and compensation to inform participants' consent to participate. Allow time for questions. Keep this brief enough to enable a swift entry into the discussion and practice reading it out loud (see exhibits for example consent language).

Develop the discussion guide

Draft a set of questions that align with the study objectives and available time, ensuring an appropriate number and order of questions to encourage meaningful discussion. Allow time for follow-up probes and clarification questions.



Assign roles

Designate a facilitator to guide the discussion and a notetaker to document participant responses and nonverbal observations. Decide whether the notetaker role will assist with follow-up probes or not.

Submit information to an institutional review board (IRB)

Collect all the documentation from the above steps and send it with your IRB application. IRB review helps to ensure that research meets standards for human subjects protections. This step is often required for publication in journals. If your institution does not have its own IRB, you can search for independent IRBs on the website of the **Association for the Accreditation of Human Research Protection Programs (aahrpp.org)**.

Recruit participants

After IRB review, implement the recruitment plan and confirm participant availability, consent and participation details. Continue recruiting until you reach the planned number of participants as well as several alternates in case of last-minute availability changes. Send calendar appointments to confirmed participants and send a reminder the day of the focus group.

Conduct and record the focus group

Facilitate the session in accordance with the discussion guide, ensuring a respectful, inclusive and confidential environment (see facilitation tips below). Use at least two methods of recording in case one fails. Using a virtual meeting platform to generate a real-time transcript can save transcription costs.

Distribute incentive payments

Hand out or email payments and thank participants for their time.

Clean and de-identify the transcript(s)

Most transcription methods introduce error. Manually fix technical terms and use the recording to clarify unclear sentences. If needed, eliminate filler words and false starts. If you are planning to share the transcript outside the research team, remove identifying characteristics such as names and institutions.

Analyze the data

Use the cleaned transcript(s) to identify key themes, patterns and insights relevant to the study objectives. Select quotations to illustrate themes. Word and Excel are helpful for thematic analysis for 1-2 focus groups. For larger numbers of groups, consider using qualitative analysis software like NVivo. Do not use artificial intelligence for analysis unless you have access to a closed model and you are sure that transcript(s) will not be used to train public models.

Disseminate the findings

Share results with relevant audiences through product formats best suited to their information needs, such as executive summaries, reports or presentations.

What are best practices in developing a discussion guide?

- ✓ Rehearse the introduction and consent statement to make sure it's concise and easy to read out loud.
- ✓ Include a warm-up question like, "Please introduce yourself and briefly share your role or setting."
- ✓ List core questions and planned probes. Example question stems are, "Tell me about your experiences with ..." and, "What challenges have you encountered with ...?"
- ✓ Avoid asking questions that invite yes/no answers, such as questions starting with, "Do you..."
- ✓ Include a closing question like, "Is there anything I didn't ask about that you think is important for me to know?"
- ✓ Script a brief thank-you to participants.



What are some facilitation tips?

- ✓ Limit discussion questions to 5-10 for a 60-minute focus group and 10-15 for 90 minutes to ensure time for probes and follow-up questions.
- ✓ Designate higher- and lower-priority discussion questions with probes to help manage time. Make facilitation notes on the discussion guide to remember to probe on key topics.
- ✓ At the beginning of the group, briefly remind participants that there are no right or wrong answers and all perspectives are welcome.
- ✓ Ask neutral follow-up questions to encourage deeper responses such as, "Can you say more about that?" or, "Does anyone have a different perspective?" or, "What's an example of that?"
- ✓ Manage group dynamics by using phrases like, "What are some thoughts from someone who hasn't spoken yet?" or "If you have already contributed on this topic, please make room for others to weigh in."
- ✓ When the conversation goes off topic, redirect by saying, "Thank you, let's return to the question about..." If you need to keep the conversation moving, simply interject and explain that you're moving to the next question to manage time.
- ✓ End on time or a few minutes early out of respect for participants.



Exhibit: recruitment message template

Date: TBD

Subject Line: Focus Group Invitation From AANP

Dear [first name],

The American Association of Nurse Practitioners® (AANP) warmly invites you to participate in a focus group about [topic]. You are receiving this email because you [main selection criterion]. The focus group will take 60 minutes or less, and you will receive a \$160 honorarium for participating.

The purpose of this focus group is to better understand your experiences with [more detail on topic or learning objectives]. Your feedback is very valuable and will inform [decisions or programs].

[Link to registration survey, with screening questions based on inclusion/exclusion criteria]

Please consider registering soon because we only have a few spots available. If you are selected to participate, you will receive an additional email from AANP confirming your selection.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach AANP by email at [insert email].

We appreciate your time and hope you will consider joining the group.

Exhibit: example of consent language

Thank you for being here today. Before we begin, I'd like to introduce myself and go over a few basics about this focus group.

Our goal is to understand your experience with [focus group topics]. There are no right or wrong answers – I just want to hear your honest thoughts.

The focus group will take up to 60 minutes. In appreciation for your time, you will receive a \$160 honorarium.

With your permission, I will audio record the discussion so I can accurately remember what was said. I will not use your name or any other identifying information in any reports or summaries.

Because this is a group discussion, I ask everyone to respect each other's privacy and not share what others say outside of this group. AANP will do our part to protect your confidentiality, but I can't guarantee that all participants will keep comments private.

Participation is completely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any question and may leave the session at any time without penalty.

By staying and participating in this group, you are giving your consent to take part and to be audio recorded.

Does anyone have any questions before we start recording? [Pause] If you have any questions later, please feel free to ask.